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ABSTRACT

The advantages of using an authentic group experience for teaching group leadership skills to social work undergraduates is the focus of this paper. The model presented integrates small group dynamics content within a human services course. Literature describing the use of experiential group membership in teaching group work is reviewed, and the development of training procedures is outlined. The relationship of the group experience to classroom material is described, and the stages of group process are discussed. The role of the instructor as leader/member is described, and outside readings, assignments, attendance requirements, and grading procedures are discussed. Results of a 1981 evaluation completed by 27 graduates of the program are discussed in terms of personal and professional gains. The employment status of graduates is presented, and a copy of the evaluation questionnaire, with results for each item, is provided. (JAC)

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GROUP MEMBERSHIP: AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING SMALL GROUP KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE SKILL

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ABSTRACT

The authors disscuss the advantages of utilizing an authentic group experience for the purpose of integrating small group dynamics content presented within a human behavior course with group leadership skills content presented within a social work practice course. They argue for the necessity of establishing a link between information presented and the personal life of the student, if that information is to be put to use. A survey of practicing graduates of the program resulted in findings which support the efficacy of such an approach.

GROUP MEMBERSHIP: AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO
TEACHING SMALL GROUP KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE SKILL

Ephross and Balgopal (1978), Viccaro (1978), and Yalom (1875) are among the authors who have pointed to an increasing empahsis on small group interventions in human service settings. Certainly the helping professionals who work in those settings should be equipped with group helping skills. The purpose of this paper is to describe one model for providing such preparation.

Our program, which prepares bachelor's level social workers, has for some time provided training in group work. This training, however, had been limited to teaching about group dynamics and group leadership via lecture. A 1978 survey of those who had graduated between 1972 and 1977 confirmed our suspicions that while this didactic training about groups was important, it was not sufficient. The respondents to our survey reported that they felt unprepared to do group work, felt uncomfortable in groups, and did not feel they had a personal sense of the nature or impact of the group process. This discomfort with groups was reflected in their practice; while 68% of the respondents reported that group work was used in their agency, only 8% were actively involved in group work.

Feedback from this survey provided the impetus and information necessary to revise the manner in which we prepared our students for group practice. The result has been a training procedure that provides the integration of theory and practice that Swaine and Baird (1977) regard as essential for social work training. Our students receive lecture presentations on group dynamics and

on leadership, but they now participate as members and as leaders in an ongoing group. The group provides students an opportunity to experience the power and impact of the group process on a first hand basis, with the consequence that group work acquires a more personalized meaning for them. The group experience constitutes the stimulus for the integration and internalization of group work values, skills, and knowledge.

Development of Training Procedures

A review of the literature reveals several examples describing the use of experiential group membership in teaching group work knowledge and skills. Mackey and O'Brian (1979) describe the use of diaries with experiential groups. Their program included ten experiential sessions lead by the instructor followed by three epilogue sessions during which session by session recordings in student diaries were used to relate the group experience to small group theory. Leadership skills were analysed during the epilogue sessions, but students had no opportunity to practice the leader role.

Rose and Finn (1980) describe their videotape-laboratory approach to group work training for undergraduates, which included an experiential component consisting of 16 two-hour laboratory sessions. The series of sessions was divided into several sequences of a few sessions each which dealt in turn with social skills training, problem solving, non-directive group, and group contracting. In this approach students were exposed to several different models of group intervention, and also were provided

with an opportunity to practice the leader role. Due to the structure of this group, however, students did not have an opportunity to participate in a coherent and in-depth group membership experience.

Viccaro (1978) discusses his development of a three step laboratory approach which he entitles "Group Simulation". Step one and step two were designed to prepare students for step three during which each student attended three group sessions and functioned as leader once. While overall student response to the program was very positive, according to the author, the students indicated that there were too few group sessions and too little preparation for the experience in the leader role.

Each of the above programs is innovative and has it's own particular strengths. They fall short, however, in two areas; the intensity of the group membership experience and/or the leadership experience provided students. Our program is unique in several ways. First, we do not conceptualize our group as a "laboratory" or "simulated" group, but as an authenic group experience. This authenticity produces a spontaneity in the group which helps students to overcome their wariness and shyness. The plethora of problems and joys associated with the human condition have provided grist for the group mill. We have dealt with problems relating to relationships, assertiveness, loneliness, human diversity, debilitating illness, and even the death of a member who was killed in an auto accident midway through the semester. The student-members develop an understanding that these are problems and issues common to most members of humanity,

whether they be social work students or clients.

Second, a structure was developed to allow for a sufficient number of sessions (15) and adequate amount of time (2 hours) to insure a group experience with depth. The student-members experience the total group process from the anxiety of the initial stage through the sense of loss during the termination stage. That the time frame is adequate is evidenced by the fact that even the shy and initially isolated members become involved enough in the process to assume an active role.

Finally, leadership training and experience is a major objective of the program. Each student functions as leader for at least two complete sessions during the course of the group. The processing session, which is an especially important aspect of the leadership training is held immediately following each group session. We share with Viccaro (1978) and Yalom (1975) a belief in the critical importance of immediate feedback for effective communication and learning.

The Program

A primary program objective is to integrate small group content being presented in a Human Behavior in the Social Environment class (HBSE) with skill content being presented in a Social Work Practice class, and to do this within the context of an authentic group experience. This objective is consistent with the stance of Swaine and Baird (1977) who argue that two processes are necessary for learning. Simply acquiring information is insufficient; it is only when the person finds

the link between the information and his or her own life that he or she is able to put the information to use. Thus, information acquired in lecture is to be given life and meaning in the experiential group.

Other program objectives include the development of higher levels of empathy, and greater ability to give and receive constructive feedback. We expect that the group experience will lead to improved student relationships, increased assertiveness, improved communication skills, and increased self-confidence.

In order to provide an adequate block of time we require concurrent enrollment in the HBSE and Practice classes which are scheduled back-to-back three times per week. Consequently, a two hour block of time is available to be used once per week for the one and one-half hour group followed by the one-half hour processing session. We consider the group to be a component of both the HBSE class and the Practice class. Didactic material related to small group theory and group process is presented during the first several sessions of the HBSE class, while parallel group leadership theory and skills material is presented in the Practice class. Within the group it is expected that the didactic classroom material will acquire greater meaning as is is experienced and applied, with additional integration and clarification occuring during the 30 minute procession period. During the processing session topics often include stage of group development, feedback for the leaders, and discussion of alternatives which might have been employed during the group. In order to facilitate a transition from the subjective involvement common during the

group experience to a more objective stance during the processing session, we provide a ten minute break between sessions and ask students to change their seating position upon their return.

The group is initiated the first week of classes and meets every week of the semester. Membership has varied between seven and twelve members. The classes have seldom exceeded twelve students, but in cases where enrollment has exceeded that number we have established two experiential groups. The group proceeds through clearly identifiable stages from a beginning anxious and ambivalent stage, then into a conflict stage culminating in the development of trust, cooperation and cohesiveness, and ending in the termination stage. During the conflict stage, which is usually reached by mid-semester, students learn conflict management skills which they often report finding useful in their life outside the group.

The design of the group most closely approximates what Schulman (1979) describes as the mutual aid model. The group leaders often follow a strategy designed to help the members create conditions where mutual aid and support can take place within the group. Student-members are encouraged to utilize the group in ways that have personal meaning for them. They are free to focus on issues of communication, relationships, personal concerns, and personal growth. Participation is voluntary and no one is pressured or required to present personal issues, but neither are they discouraged. It is our experience that sharing and self-disclosure increases rapidly as the group develops. During the first session a group contract is established,

with special discussion of the nature and limits of confidentiality. Group norms are established as the group develops and usually relate to trust, honesty, supportiveness, feedback, sharing, and confrontation.

During the initial session the instructor functions as group leader, modeling the leader role and beginning the process of group development. After the initial session, however, and during the next 14 sessions the instructor becomes a group member. Though it may take a little longer, the group accepts the instructor-member as another person who has his or her own hopes, dreams, fears and problems, just as any other haman being. As Yalom (1975) has pointed out, assuming the member role requires that the instructor give up his or her one-up athority and evaluator role during that one and one-half hour period. It requires that he or she model self-disclosure, trust, openness and genuine caring; that is, that he or she be willing to become human and vulnerable. This serves two functions; first it is necessary if the instructor expects to be accepted as a trusted member of the group and thus not serve to stiffle the development of trust and cohesiveness it the group, and second, it provides powerful modeling of effective member behavior.

The instructor-member maintains a monitoring or protective function within the group, but we do not see this as inconsistant with his or her member role. The other members are aware that the instructor-member will intervene should the focus of the group seriously threaten a member. The instructor-member would do this from the stance of a caring and knowledgeable member

rather than as an authority, and thus would model appropriate supportive mutual aid behavior. We believe that this may even serve to increase the sense of safety experienced by student-members and thus to facilitate risk taking behaviors on their part. We have not yet found it necessary to exercise this protective function, and thus discussion of its potential effect of the group process remains academic.

A system of rotating coleadership is utilized, which insures that every student serves at least two sessions in the leader role. During each session one of the coleaders has been a leader in the previous session, which means that each person serves two consecutive sessions as leader resulting in some degree of leadership consistency. Another advantage of this system is that a student leader often functions at a higher level during the second session as leader, since initial first session anxiety which blocked sponteneity and skill has somewhat abated.

The coleaders are required to meet with the instructor during the week prior to their turn in the leader role. Present level of group development, dynamics of the group, and expectations and responsibilities of the leader role are discussed during this meeting. Creativity is encouraged in the student's planning for the leadership experience and final decisions on how to proceed are left up to the leaders. Miscalculations on their part are analyzed during the processing following their session. In addition to providing an important experience in preparation for the present group, this planning meeting also models appropriate processing and planning functions to be generalized to future group work practice.

In preparation for the leader role students are required to read two books or articles dealing with group leadership. Following their leadership experience they submit a two part paper; the first part reviewing the preparatory leadership readings and the second part critically evaluating their performance in the leader role. Students report that they learn a great deal from the combined process of reading, preparatory meeting, and feedback during the processing session, all of which is associated with the experience of leading the group. They also find that they gain through observation of other students in the leader role, and consequent feedback during the processing session.

As a part of the grading procedure two written assignments are required. The paper described above, based on the leadership readings and critical self-evaluation of leader performance constitutes the written assignment for the Practice class portion of the group experience. For the HBSE class students trace the developing group dynamics within a weekly journal. The following questions are to guide the construction of the weekly journal entry: (1) What behaviors and discussion topics indicate the stage of group development? (2) What overt and covert norms do you see developing? (3) What degree of cohesiveness do you observe and what do you think has affected it? and (4) What changes have you seen in yourself and others as a result of the groups development?

Attendance and leadership practice are required but active participation while in the member role is completely voluntary. It is clearly spelled out in the grading contract that the grade

reflects performance on written assignments and attendance, but does not reflect skill demonstrated while practicing the leader role nor amount of participation while in the member role.

After struggling with the issue of required group attendance we concluded that required attendance is appropriate since the goal of the group is educational and not personal change or treatment. The lessons to be learned from the group experience require attendance; they are not available in books or lectures. We are not requiring therapy, though therapeutic change sometimes occurs. We are not requiring self-disclosure, though many members share a great deal of themselves. We do not even require active participation, though nearly all actively participate at various points during the series of group sessions. Journal comments suggest that even students who participate minimally in the group often feel they learn a great deal through observation of group behavior and from their leadership practice experience.

Our primary motivation for adding the experiential group component was to better prepare students to initiate and lead groups following graduation. We decided, therefore, to ask graduates of our program who had been involved in the group experience for their evaluation of the experience and if, in their opinion, it had influenced their agency practice.

Evaluation

During the fall of 1981 questionnaires were sent to all 36 individuals who had participated in the group experience and who had also graduated during May, 1981, or before. Of the 36 questionnaires mailed, 27 were completed and returned; a 75%

return rate. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with a number of statements about the group experience (Table 1), and information was requested concerning present employment and group practice experience (Table 2).

Table 1

On items related to personal gains, respondents agreed that as a result of the group experience they feel more comfortable in groups, find it easier to give and receive feedback, have an increased ability to trust and share with others, and have a better understanding of what clients experience. They agreed that they have a good feeling about the group experience, rated it as a very important experience to them, and strongly agreed that they would recommend it to other social work students.

The respondents agreed that as a consequence of the group experience they feel better prepared to initiate and lead a group. Fewer than one-half indicated that they were less comfortable with group work than with individual work. The majority disagreed that individual work is more valuable, though in their comments they suggested that the choice between individual and group interventions depended on the client, the problem, and the situation. While the majority felt group work was suitable for use in their agencies, less than one-half agreed that they had been encouraged in their agencies to do groups, and over one-half

agreed that they did not have time to run a group.

Of the 27 respondents, 17 (63%) indicated that the experiential group was their first group experience. Of the ten (37%) who reported being in previous groups, most reported that those groups were primarily social such as greek societies and clubs. Only five (19%) reported a prior group leadership experience, and in several of those cases it was as an officer in a club. This lack of experience with helping groups underlines the importance of providing undergraduate group experience if students are to be even minimally prepared for the use of group interventions.

Table 2

Of the 27 individuals who responded, 23 (85%) were employed in human service positions, though not all were employed as social workers. Such other human service positions as child care worker, probation officer and geriatric care worker were reported. Two additional students were in graduate school, and only two of the 27 were uninvolved in the human service field. Of those employed in human service jobs, 17 (68%) reported that group work was utilized in their agencies. However, only eight (32%) of the respondents were actively involved in group work.

Conclusion

Our ultimate goal in creating the experiential group was to better prepare students to utilize group inteventions as employees of human service agencies. The questionnaire findings

suggest that our graduates recognize the effectiveness of group approaches, feel relatively comfortable with group work, and feel prepared to initiate and lead groups. It appears, however, that they are seldom encouraged by their agencies to initiate groups. Even in agencies which utilize groups, the knowledge and skill of these individuals is often not utilized.

Though there is an incresing emphasis on group intervention, it appears that there are still many human service agencies which do not utilize group approaches. Education of the administrators of those agencies concerning the effectiveness and relative efficiency of group services seems indicated. It is important that they be appraised of the many different purposes that a group may have, such as support, information giving, mutual aid, teaching, and problem solving, to name a few. They need to know that undergraduate social work training is designed to produce graduates who are prepared to initiate and lead such groups.

The questionnaire findings suggest that other objectives of the program were also achieved, such as increased empathy for the client role, improved utilization of feedback, and increased self-awareness. In addition to the favorable "mean ratings" presented in Table 1, comments on class evaluation forms were usually very positive. Written comments such as these were common: "I became better able to understand and accept differences in other students"; "I became a lot more comfortable giving and receiving feedback"; It helped me learn to speak up"; "It helped me look at myself"; and "I think I grew a lot personally".

It is also our impression that many students acquired important personal insights, grew in their ability to accept

and empathize with others, and perhaps most importantly, began the necessary work of personal evaluation and investment in personal change and growth necessary if they are to become fully effective human beings and helping professionals. Carkhuff and Berenson (1967) have emphasized and presented research evidence to support, the important positive relationship between level of helper personal functioning and level of effectiveness as a helper.

The gains associated with active group involvement are not limited to students alone, but also impact the instructor. The artificial barriers of authority and status crumble with the realization that we are all more alike than different; whether we are black or white, male or female, student or instructor, client or helper. The risks associated with becoming genuine sometimes seem great, but powerful gains in understanding, acceptance, and compassion often follow. For student and instructor alike the authenticity and relevance of the educational encounter is increased.

We recognize that two or three sessions as group leader are not sufficient to develop adequate skill and comfort with the leader role. It is but an introduction. Additional experience as a coleader during field placement is crucial. We also encourage students to make an effort to enter a group as coleader with an experienced leader upon agency employment in order to increase their experience and skill. Recognizing that in some cases they may be the first in their agency to initiate a group, and that they may be forced to create a group with little or no encouragement

or supervision, we discuss in some detail the appropriate use of consultation.

In conclusion, the findings of our survey have been encouraging. They have provided us with information concerning the subjective impressions of our students concerning the effectiveness of our approach to teaching group knowledge and interventive skills. These findings do not substitute, however, for controlled research designed to determine what aspects of the didactic and experiential components of our educative process are most effective in generating which outcomes. This seems to us to be the nessesary next step in our search for more potent ways to prepare students who personally own the knowledge and skills nessesary for effective practice.

TABLE 1

Student Evaluation of Group Experience

	STATEMENTS*	N	MEAN
1.	The group experience helped me to be more comfortable in groups.	27	4.59
2.	I feel better prepared to lead a group because of the group experience.	27	4.41
3.	Group work is not suitable for use in my agency.	24	2.17
4.	I have been encouraged to do group work in my agency.	24	2.92
5.	I feel more comfortable giving and receiving feedback since the group experience.	27	4.07
6.	Individual counseling is more valuable than group work.	27	2.70
7.	I don't have time to run a group.	23	3.22
8.	My agency will not permit me to start a group.	22	2.18
9.	I am less comfortable with group work than with individual counseling.	27	2.63
10.	The group was an important experience for me.	27	4.41
11.	I learned important communication skills in the group.	27	4.44
12.	I feel that I know how to set up a group.	27	4.15
13.	The group increased my ability to trust and share with others.	27	4.11
14.	I have a better understanding of what clients feel because of my group experience.	27	4.22
15.	I do not feel good about my group experience.	27	1.37
16.	I would recommend the group experience to other students.	27	4.59

* Subjects were asked to respond by rating their agreement with each statement on a scale ranging from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

TABLE 2

Group Experience and Present Employment

QUESTION	YES	%	NO	%
1. Had you been a member of a group before this group experience?	10	(37%)	17	(63%)
2. Had you been a leader of a group before this group experience?	5	(19%)	22	(81%)
3. Are you employed in a social work position or other human service position or a graduate school practicum?*	25	(93%)	2	(7%)
a. Is group work employed in your agency?	17	(68%)	8	(32%)
b. Are you involved in group work in your agency?	8	(32%)	17	(68%)

* Twenty-three are employed in human service agencies, two are in graduate school practicums.

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